

Finalist, Fiction

Tree Planters
By Stephen Koster

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The stream was filled with pop cans, newspapers, a used diaper at the water's edge, a rubber glove. Two middle-aged men approached the stream, wearing camouflage and rain boots. The second man held the first man's sleeve, and let it pull him along.

The first man, Art, was short, black-haired, and walked with a hunch, had empty sleeves where his arms should be, and behind him followed the older, taller, balder, darker man, his friend, Ralph.

The blind man stumbled, as they approached the stream, and grabbed hold of Art's shoulder for support.

Art led his friend to the water's edge, and stood still.

"What is it?" asked Ralph, with open eyes, smiling out the side of his mouth. "Forgotten where we are?"

"The river's higher," Art said, the lines in his face deepening, his one sleeve hanging down his waist, and the other held firmly by Ralph.

"Let's just wade it," said Ralph, looking away.

"I'm going to have to piggy-back you," said Art, leaning forward to pull his sleeve from his blind friend's hands.

"I don't mind if you don't."

Art's voice was gruff and slow. "Can you roll up my pant-legs?"

"Sure thing," the other man said, in his softer voice.

Ralph bent down and felt around his own ankle for the lip of his jeans, and rolled up the edges under his knees. Then he reached forward, swiping into air, until Art stepped closer, and the blind man felt one leg, rolled up the pants, then found the other, and did the same.

Birds called from their nests, in the few sparse trees.

“It’s a bit dirty in there, Ralph,” said Art.

“Could have fooled me.”

Ralph, with his trembling hands, with veins sticking out, reached forward until he found Art’s back, searching around for shoulders, found them, and got ready to boost.

“Ready?”

“Ready.”

Ralph vaulted onto Art like the back of a horse and went too high. Evidently, the armless man wasn’t ready. They tumbled over onto the flat rocks by the stream.

“Not ready, Art?”

“Not ready.”

They stood up, and got back into position. This time, Ralph brought his arm around his hunched friend’s chest, and got his legs around Art’s hips, and locked them in, squeezing tight.

“Ready?”

“Go.”

Art walked forward into the stream, bags swinging on Ralph’s back. The water rose to Art’s shins, ice cold, pulling his leg hairs into the water.

The armless man’s neck tensed at the temperature of the water, and Ralph sensed it.

“How’s the water?” the balding man asked.

“It’s freezing.”

“Worth the sacrifice, my friend. Onward.”

Art struggled under the weight of his friend and took an oblong route to avoid the grimmest pieces of garbage.

Three quarters of the way through the stream Art stepped on a glass bottle, hidden under the mud, and the skin between his big toe and second toe separated.

“Ow. Shit,” the bent-over man said.

“What?” asked the piggy-back rider. “What happened? Put me down. You stepped on something.”

“No,” said Art, with a strained jaw. “We can cross first.”

Art carefully avoided the rest of the glass, then took a couple long steps and crossed to dry land, and squatted so his friend could get down.

“Ow, ow, fuck.”

“What is it, you big baby?”

“I stepped on something sharp.”

Art sat on a fallen log, and looked at his shoe. There was no blood, but there was a hole where the glass had come through. His foot burned as he turned to his friend.

“Can you take my shoe off? I need to look at this.”

Ralph knelt on the ground in front of the younger man, and felt around the grass and sticks until he felt Art’s shoe, and then Art’s shoelaces.

The cut man groaned as his blind friend pressed on his toe.

Ralph quickly pulled apart the laces, and opened the shoe for the sighted man’s foot to come out.

“Hold the bottom, please,” said Art.

Ralph held the bottom of the shoe, and Art pulled his foot out. The bottom of the sock was soaked in red, an oblong shape that went toe to heel.

“Ah, shit,” Art said, looking at his sock.

Ralph slowly moved his fingers until he touched Art’s sock, then moved up to the ankle, and pulled the sock off the foot.

“How bad is it?” the kneeling blind man asked.

Art turned his foot to be able to see the small cut about an inch long, almost in the spot between toes, right in the joint he used to grip things.

“It looks a lot worse than it is,” said Art. “There’s a lot of blood.”

“Good thing we have the kit,” said Ralph. “Do you want to head back after we patch it up?”

Art looked incredulous—not that it mattered to Ralph.

“No,” the man holding his naked foot said. “I’ll be fine. You’ll have to help me with lunch, that’s all.”

“I can do that,” said Ralph.

Ralph patched up the cut under Art’s directions, rinsing it with burning ruble alcohol, putting cotton on the wound and covering it with a bandage.

“Good as new,” said Art.

They continued on through the empty fields, growing farther and farther from housing, until the only human evidence was the occasional ATV trail, and then nothing at all. Just empty plains, the odd deciduous tree, ravens and woodpeckers, Art in front, leading his blind friend by an empty sleeve.

They came to a golden plain of tall grass with decaying stumps coming up from the ground.

“Alright,” Art said. “We’re here.”

“I’m starting to be able to recognize it,” said Ralph, holding his head up. “It’s a little more piney here, and I think that’s from us.”

“Probably is,” said the younger man.

Art pulled Ralph over to a small line of pine saplings, almost submerged in the tall grass. Ralph took their bags off his shoulder and prepared to drop them squarely on the last sapling in line when Art said, “A little to your left, Ralph,” and the camouflaged man adjusted the bag’s trajectory, dropping it away from the trees. Ralph opened the large bag and felt inside, staring into the horizon. The blind man felt a small folding camp shovel and opened it up.

Art went to stand at the end of the line of saplings, and thumped his good foot on the ground, “Here,” he said.

Ralph put the shovel into the soft black earth on an angle, shifted the wedge of earth to one side, took a sapling from the bag and guided its roots into the hole, and covered it again.

They repeated this all the way across the field, Art saying, “Here,” thumping his boot, and Ralph planting the tree.

As the sun reached the middle of the sky, Ralph took off Art’s jacket, revealing two sleeves of a sweater, knotted at the ends, throwing the proportions of Art’s body into something abstract.

“I know I say this all the time, but it’s good that we do this.”

Ralph nodded to a tree stump he thought was Art.

“They aren’t the people who get things done. They’re selfish.”

The balding blind man laughed, and pushed the shovel into the ground.

“Are you saying this is our lot in life?”

“Not our lot. Our duty.”

Ralph nodded yet again. “We need air to breathe.”

Art helped open a few of the food containers with his good foot, but with his injury, Ralph did most of the arranging, his hands waiting for his younger friend’s directions.

Under that. Over that. Left. Hot. Cold. Warmer.

Eventually they got enough food for them both and they snacked, lying back in the long grass, listening to the occasional bee wizz overhead.

As they lay, Ralph frowned like he had something on his mind.

“You know,” Ralph said, his eyes grey, staring into the sun without squinting. “I’m glad we met.”

Art chewed on his lunch. “It goes without saying. I have no arms.”

“I know, I know. Sometimes I think it’s funny. Your arms, my eyes.”

“It is pretty funny.”

“How is your wife?”

“She’s well, I think.”

Art found he could hold eye-contact with Ralph longer than any other man, mostly because the older man never looked back.

They finished planting the line of saplings and headed back across the fields. When Art looked back, the line of new saplings extended further than the hunched man could see. They forded the creek at a different point to avoid the glass, piggy-backed, and crossed without incident.

“How’s the foot?” asked Ralph, from on Art’s back.

“Not bad,” said Art. “Wet.”

They laughed like whiskey drinkers, as the afternoon started to come on. When they reached the other side, Ralph dismounted and took Art’s empty sleeve, and from some angles, with the evening coming on, it looked like the two men were holding hands.

When the tree planters reached the first ATV trail, Ralph asked, “We’re on the trail, aren’t we?”

“Yes,” said Art.

“Want to take it all the way out?”

“Sounds good to me.”

As they crested the top of a rolling hill, full of brush and stones, a pick-up truck came up the trail going the opposite way. Art waved to the truck, and at that moment, the blind man stumbled on one of the rocks in the trail, and gripped Art’s shoulder tightly to stop from falling, one hand on Art’s sleeve, one hand on Art’s shoulder.

The driver of the truck, a young red-faced man with a blonde beard, saw what he saw. The flannel-wearing man said a single word to describe the two men, and swerved the truck a little to bump into the stumbling man.

The front of the truck hit Ralph square in the hip, and he shrieked as it hit. The truck glided for a moment, then the driver pulled away and burned rubber over the other side of the hill.

“Are you okay, Ralph?” Art asked, falling over with his friend, bracing Ralph’s head on his knees.

“My hip hurts—a bitch.”

“It’s alright,” Art said, “We’ll get you—”

“Fuck that kills.”

“Hey, don’t swear. I swear.”

“Look at us. Old men.”

“Here, rest a minute, Ralph, I think we’re going to have to take you to a hospital when we’re out. Maybe I should go too, for my foot. Just lie down a moment. Are you bleeding? Did you hear what the guy in the truck said?”

Ralph winced, lying on the grass and the dirt, his eyes the same milky hue as they always were. “No, I didn’t,” the blind man spoke, taking short breaths. “What did he say?”

Art shook the hair out of his face and looked up and down the trail, at the long avenues of naturally-planted trees.

“Nothing,” the younger friend said. “I just wondered if you had.”